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## Featured Member Mike Arnzen: Horror writer does his best work 'having fun'

By Kim Seidel

Horror writer Mike Arnzen credits "an enormous amount of luck" for the success that has earned him three Bram Stoker Awards and other accolades. Yet he has had to have an incredible amount of talent and courage, mixed in with a lot of humor, to succeed in this challenging genre of horror writing.

Arnzen started writing little horror tales by hand when he was in the Army in the mid-1980s. "I used to pass them around to my buddies for a lark when we were all camping out in the field for exercises without much entertainment," he said.

While attending Colorado State University-Pueblo in 1989, he seriously started to wonder how writers got published. The English literature classes he was taking weren't addressing those practical matters, he said. He would later "remedy" this problem for others in the same shoes by one day teaching in Seton Hill University's Writing Popular Fiction program.

During college, he had sold a few short stories to a magazine, when he found an idea that he believed would sustain a novel – *Grave Markings*. "I wrote in a blur, and then didn't have a clue what to do next," he said. "I decided to try the horror novel publisher – Dell Books



**Mike Arnzen**

**6/16/08 — Andrew Johnson** (North Mankato, MN) recently published an article in *Gifted Child Today* (2008, 31, 41-29) entitled, "Internet Strategies for gifted students." His latest book, *Teaching and writing: Research-based strategies for teachers, tutors, parents, and paraprofessionals*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, will be out in September 2009. He is also under contract to write a second edition of his social studies textbook, *Making connections in elementary and middle school social studies*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sages.

**5/23/08 — Guesna Dohrman**, a professor of mathematics at Tallahassee Community College, recently started a non-profit organization called **SOMETHINGPOSITIVE**. Based in Tampa, Florida, it's mission is to encourage and promote physical activity for people with MS in the Tallahassee and Tampa, Florida areas.

**5/23/08 — William Koenecke** received tenure from the Murray State University Board of Regents on Friday, May 16, 2008. He has also signed a contract with Kendall Hunt for a book to be published in December 2008. It has the working title: "Improving the Writing Skills of Tomorrow's Teacher."

**5/23/08 — Jean A. Lukesh** received her doctorate in education (Ed.D.) from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln on

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- who I thought had the neatest covers. I just put it in a box with a cover letter."

To his surprise, he received a call from the publisher two months later when he was still a junior at CSU. "I feel like it was pure luck," he said. "But maybe instinctively I knew that the publisher was the right one for me, because I already was a fan of their line."

He learned a lot about writing and publishing from that experience. Although it took him about three weeks to draft his first novel, he spent two more years revising it with the help from an editor. "And then luck struck again: I won the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement in a First Novel from the Horror Writers Association in 1994", he said.

From there, Arnzen's career took off. The award helped him get into good graduate schools. He wrote another horror novel, *Play Dead*, at the University of Idaho, where he earned his master's degree in 1994. Next, he studied the uncanny in literature and film for his doctorate degree, which he earned from the University of Oregon in 1999. During this time, he was dedicated to consistently producing and publishing his work.

He has now been writing horror for two decades. Along with even more Bram Stoker awards, he earned an International Horror Critics Guild Award, as well as honors for his website [gorelets.com](#), and *Play Dead*, which was printed in 2005. He's completed three story collections, *100 Jolts*, *Fluid Mosaic*, and last year's *Proverbs for Monsters*, which won him his fourth Bram Stoker Award. In addition to seven poetry books and several works of criticism, his short stories have been reprinted in *Year's Best* anthologies.

Along with his impressive writing career, Arnzen is a tenured professor at Seton Hill in Greensburg, Pa., where he has taught full-time since 1999. "This allows me to teach in the horror writing genre that I love so much," he said. "I've worked hard over those 20 years, but I still feel like I've had an enormous amount of luck all the way."

Arnzen also credits his success with taking creative risks. "This is another way of saying I don't mind embarrassing myself," he said. "Genres rely on conventions and expectations, so many writers err on the side of repeating what's been done before." Arnzen said he's "always thrown caution to the wind and tried to be as weird and experimental as I can. I try not to censor myself too much."

Horror itself can be taken too seriously at times. Arnzen balances this seriousness with humor. "I don't hold back the humor. To me, a lot of the appeal of horror is its absurdity," he said. "I find much of what I've read or seen in horror quite laughable."

Pay attention to an audience at a horror film, Arnzen said, and you'll see that people are laughing as much as they're screaming or shrinking in their seats. Horror is a genre where people expect only the unexpected. Writing horror is a "great place to get away with murder as a creative artist," Arnzen said. "It's the most subversive popular genre there is. I feel very liberated writing for that audience."

In the classroom, students love to know that their teacher is an authority on a topic. "Yet, if they sense that the teacher is using his own books to make a profit or to stroke his ego, they won't take the work seriously," Arnzen said. "Or they'll otherwise resent the teacher. It's important to choose other texts to round out your curriculum if you're going to teach your own text, or try to find a text which best shares your views on the subject at hand."

Arnzen loves teaching as much as he loves writing. It takes a conscious effort to balance the two careers. "Students energize me. Though publishing deeply rewards me, with teaching I feel like I'm doing something palpable to contribute to the world," he said. "So I really get involved in it."

University of Nebraska-Lincoln on May 9, 2008. Lukesh is the author of the award-winning history textbook, *The Nebraska Adventure*.

**5/12/08** — **Judith Haynes** retired from Linfield College at the end of fall semester 2007, and started her own business, Haylo Education Solutions, LLC (<http://www.hayloes.com>) in January 2008. Haylo assists students and teachers with their education issues. They help teachers catch up with the twenty-first century by modifying or preparing their curriculum to be presented on-line in an interactive, easy to use format. They also help people who teach or make presentations as part of their work, but haven't been trained in teaching techniques. Consultations are done on-line or in person, in classroom or workshop settings, or on a one-to-one basis.

**4/9/08** — **TAA Executive Director Richard Hull** published the second edition of *Ethical Issues in the New Reproductive Technologies* by Prometheus Books in 2005, as a revised, updated, and expanded version of the first edition, published in 1990 by Wadsworth. An electronic edition of the book, self-published by Hull, is available through his website, <http://www.richard-t-hull.com>.

Hull also published an article in *Free Inquiry* (vol 28, nos 2&3), entitled, "Can We Survive? The Changes Required to Deal Effectively With Global Warming," with co-authors Stephen Paley and George K. Oister. He is also completing, with coauthors Paley and Oister, an academic version of the two-part article, that will appear in a volume edited by Paul Kries and Randall Osborne, *Global Community, Global Security*, which will be published in 2008 by Editions Rodopi.

**4/4/08** — **Matt Stevens** was interviewed by the journal of the Design-Build Institute of America, *Design-Build Dateline*, about his book, *Managing a Construction Firm on Just 24 Hours a Day*. Read the interview: [Click here](#)

**1/11/08** — **Jerry D. Wilson**, the author of nine physics or physical science textbooks, recently published a trade book, *Best of the Curiosity Corner*, a compilation articles from newspaper columns he wrote for 26 years. Visit the book's website: [Click here](#)

**11/1/07** — TAA member **Kimberly Davies** recently published her first textbook, "The Murder Book: Examining Homicide," with Prentice Hall.

**9/11/07** — At the Hollywood Book Festival 2007, TAA member **Helen Gordon** earned an award for best book in the category of historical fiction for her novel, *Voice of the*

really get involved in it.

At one point, Arnzen realized he was spending too much time commenting on students' papers. He reminded himself that his own writing is just as important to students. That turned into a personal mantra that keeps him balanced. Now he commits to his writing for two hours each morning, when the word well hasn't yet run dry and the coffeepot is flowing freely.

From his home office, he said he's sitting BIC ("butt in chair") in his bathrobe before he even starts to think about teaching, doing committee work, taking a shower, what he's wearing that day, what's playing on TV, or anything else. Having a daily routine means he keeps productive. He tries to juggle different writing projects, such as a poetry series, an academic article, or a novel chapter, to keep his creative juices flowing.

"The trick is to figure out what routine works for you best," he said. "It can take a lot of self-conscious experiment to find your rhythm. For academics, getting a sense of balance between instruction and scholarship is crucial. I strive for balance because one always feeds into the other too."

The electronic media is just another playground for finding his balance and expressing his creativity. Since 2000, Gorelets.com has become a place for Arnzen to "do things outside the auspices of traditional publishing, to post weird writings and sketches and flash fiction that I knew probably wouldn't find a place in magazines or books." He rightly figured that if it was fun for him, it would be fun for others. He's thrilled to know he's doing things few others are dare to do.

One example is "Audiovile," which started out as an audiobook version of his book, 100 Jolts. It evolved into something closer to a rock album of flash fiction. "I wanted to creatively exploit the sonic space by adding background music to my stories as I read them, but then I moved the music into the foreground and restructured the stories to fit the beat," he said. "It really turned out wild and crazy and entertaining because it's so bizarre."

Arnzen finds many benefits as an artist to stretching himself through technology. "It trains you to think differently about what you take for granted about writing," he said. "I've learned to sharpen and edit my prose by writing such short pieces. I've rediscovered the musicality of language by playing around with music."

Arnzen says he used to take himself too seriously, especially after winning his first Bram Stoker Award. Now, he's discovered the more he has fun, the more people enjoy his work.

His current focus has been on non-fiction pieces, including revising his old doctoral dissertation for a book called *The Popular Uncanny*, which is coming out from Guide Dog Books in 2009. He's launched a new web blog about the topic at his website to keep him current and to encourage him to find new research in the psychoanalytic cultural studies and horror genre theory.

In addition, he's co-editing a textbook, *Many Genres, One Craft*, a collection of genre writing advice by the renowned teachers and published students from Seton Hill University. In the future, he hopes to write his own instructional writing guide that captures his contrarian approach to the field of writing and publishing.

Arnzen lives in Greensburg with his wife of 16 years artist Renate Arnzen, who sometimes acts as his sounding board and story illustrator. He credits much of his success to her longstanding support, faith and inspiration.

#### **Advice from Arnzen for aspiring writers of horror:**

Explore your own personal fears in an honest and engaging way.

*Vanquished: The Story of the Slave Marina and Hernan Cortes.* The contest was judged on the basis of the author's story-telling ability plus the potential for the novel to translate into other media such as a movie or television series.

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Email your website to [kim.pawlak@taaonline.net](mailto:kim.pawlak@taaonline.net)

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Read widely in the genre.

Watch horror movies, but don't assume you understand horror, just because you're a fan of film. By watching film, you will know their strategies and pleasures.

Try to write the sort of material that you would never see in a film. This will make your writing more original. Readers will turn to your work because they want to read something they haven't seen before in movies.

Read the book, "On Writing Horror," edited by Mort Castle for Writer's Digest Books. It's chock full of great advice from contemporary storytellers. Arnzen has an essay in this book about the study of the genre in academia as well.

*Kim Seidel is a freelance writer based in Onalaska, Wis.*

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